Cultural Daily

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Raising Money for Films: The Power of One

Morrie Warshawski · Thursday, February 21st, 2013

In The Real World

You're standing in a long line at the supermarket and start up a conversation with the man behind you. He discovers you're a filmmaker, asks about your current project. As fate would have it, he is very interested in the subject of your film because of his family background. He gives you his card and asks that you send him some information. A couple of weeks later you receive a four-figure donation in the mail.

You're having lunch with your grandmother. The conversation leads into your mentioning how difficult it has been to complete your film because you can't find that last $5,000. Out of nowhere, she promises to mention your dilemma to her quilting group, and they miraculously come back with an offer to provide the finishing funds.

You've just come up with the idea for a new doc and decide to test the idea out on a corporate CEO you once met who you know has a personal interest in the subject matte. The conversation quickly turns into a $10,000 donation, even though you had no intention at first of asking for support.

These are just a few real world stories from filmmakers I have worked with. They exemplify the "power of one," the tremendous range of possibilities in the world of raising money for films from individuals or via **US Grants**.

When I first started working with filmmakers, I noticed that there was a very heavy reliance on fundraising through grant writing to government agencies and private foundations, but an extreme reluctance to go to individuals for support. And yet, as any fundraising professional will tell you, in an average year anywhere from 82% to 89% of all donations for all types of nonprofit activities comes from individuals. That's an eye opening statistic.

There are some lovely built-in advantages to looking to individuals for support. Individuals are the fastest to a donation. You could put this article down right now, go call someone, make an impassioned pitch, and have a donation by credit card on your website immediately, or by personal check in the mail tomorrow. It can and does happen that fast. Another advantage to individual donors is that they are everywhere, and they rarely require a whole lot of paperwork. Going to individuals personalizes the funding process, puts a face on the donor and involves the filmmakers more directly in the community. Individual fundraising is also good for the morale of the filmmaker and the crew because these efforts generally result in a steady trickle of donations that help keep things alive.

If you decide to pursue this route for funding, here are a few pointers:

Personalize everything in the process. Always try to approach individuals through other people they know. If you're sending out letters, have them personally signed by a friend of the recipient.
Have a variety of strong, compelling and passionate pitches ready to use at any and all times. You need, at the very least, a short one-to-five word "hook", and a 20-second pitch that is dynamite.
Role-play. This is the best way to learn how to get comfortable with and good at pitching and asking for a donation.
Learn how to listen. Nothing irritates a potential donor more than a lengthy monologue about your film. Learn how to dialogue.
Keep good records. Start a simple data base and keep track of every individual that you come in contact with, or plan to solicit.
Keep passion at the fore. With individuals, passion is a key element. They need to sense your passion, and they need to feel that passion themselves before they will donate.
Give thanks. You can never say "thank you" too often. It costs nothing and it reaps large rewards in the long term.
"If you want advice, ask for money. If you want money, ask for advice." Keep this saying in mind as you start to build relationships that you hope will eventually result in donations.
Get centered in your "mission." Spend some time understanding why you are doing this type of work, and what makes it so important to you. This gives you the backbone you will need to do any type of fundraising over time, because rejection is the norm instead of the exception. A strong commitment to a mission gives you the strength and fortitude to keep moving forward.
Let me end by reminding you of a concept that James Brown was so fond of – "the power of one," that attention to the first beat, to that one note and each individual note thereafter – and by extension, to those individuals out there who one-at-a-time and one-by-one want to help you complete your film.

Morrie will be giving a special event teleseminar on March 5, 2013, to teach you how to get money from donations, foundations, grants and government sources. You can register here.

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